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House hearings target president

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The House Intelligence Committee will attempt to discredit President Reagan's foreign policy initiatives in hearings this week, Illinois Rep. Henry Hyde said yesterday.

The influential Republican member of the intelligence panel said the committee may try to force Mr. Reagan's national security adviser, John Poindexter, to testify under oath at the hearings.

The White House has indicated it would invoke executive privilege to bar Mr. Poindexter from testifying under oath before the committee. Unlike Cabinet members, the national security adviser is appointed by the president without Senate approval.

"I expect the opening guns of a prolonged confrontation between Democratic members and the White House," said Mr. Hyde. "I hope it's of short duration, because we aren't presenting a very good face to the world."

Both the House and Senate intelligence committees have scheduled Friday hearings on secret White House dealings with factions in Iran, a move the administration said led to freedom for three American hostages.

CIA Director William Casey is scheduled to speak to both committees, staff spokesmen said. But the House committee will ask several other high-ranking administration officials to testify, including Secretary of State George Shultz, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and possibly Mr. Poindexter, congressional sources said.

Mr. Poindexter has said he is willing to talk informally with congressional leaders, but that Mr. Casey is expected to testify formally on behalf of the administration.

Mr. Hyde said the committee "will probably force the White House to invoke executive privilege" to block Mr. Poindexter from testifying.

The committee will claim that Mr. Reagan violated the 1947 National Security Act that requires the president to keep the intelligence committees "fully and currently informed" of all intelligence activities, Mr. Hyde said.

House Democratic leader Jim Wright has charged that Mr. Reagan broke the law by authorizing 18 months of clandestine contacts with factions in Iran without notifying congressional leaders.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton, Indiana Democrat, could not be reached for comment yesterday.

But departing Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. last week urged Mr. Hamilton to use "subpoenas where there should be subpoenas."

Rep. Dave McCurdy, Oklahoma Democrat and a member of the Intelligence Committee, said the NSC has "clearly stepped outside of the realm on executive privilege."

"Adm. Poindexter and members of the National Security Council are their key players and I think we will not be satisfied until we hear from them directly," Mr. McCurdy said in a weekend interview on CNN.

Mr. Hyde, one of a handful of lawmakers briefed at the White House last week, said the administration's decision not to tell congressional leaders about the Iranian initiative was "a tactical error" that was "understandable, if not supportable."

"The inability of Congress to keep a secret is legendary," he said.

Mr. Hyde said Democrats are "still bristling from the hostage debacle" in Iran in 1980, at the end of former President Jimmy Carter's administration. "This gives them a little retribution," he said.

"They will attempt to discredit the entire Reagan administration, as far as foreign policy is concerned," Mr. Hyde said. "The mandarins and war lords on the Hill will want to strut and fret their hour upon the stage. They will circle and assault and assail, and then hopefully it will die a natural death."